DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 028 416 AL 001 767

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The Uncle Remus Dialect: A Preliminary Linguistic View.

Pub Date Mar 69

Note-7p.; Paper presented at the Southeastern Conference on Linguistics, Florida State University, Tallahassee, March 28-30, 1969.

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.45

Descriptors-*African Languages, American English, Creoles, *Dialect Studies, Grammar, Morphology (Languages), *Negro Dialects, *Nonstandard Dialects, Phonology, Pidgins, Regional Dialects, Southern States, Syntax, Verbs

Identifiers-Joel Chandler Harris, Melville Herskovits, Niger Congo Languages, Uncle Remus

Anthropologist Melville Herskovits, in the section on language of his book "The Myth of the Negro Past" (1941), gives one of the first scientific orientations to the study of black speech in the United States. His basic contribution was to establish the following main points: (1) that the black people in the New World came from regions of Africa where languages of the Niger-Congo family (Greenberg classification) were spoken; (2) that inevitably upon initial contact with New World dialects of European languages, speakers of these African languages created pidgins overwhelmingly Niger-Congo in structure and varyingly European in lexicon; and (3) that the pidgins were succeeded by creoles. Looking at Joel Chandler Harris' Uncle Remus cycle from this point of view, the author believes that Harris emerges as a skilled recorder of such a creolized variety of Southern speech--the black Middle Georgia dialect. The most conspicuous features of this dialect are: the absence of the interdental consonant in any position, palatalization of the voiced and voiceless velar consonants, suppression of all varieties of "r," deletion of prefixing elements, contraction, and the uninflected verb and genitive. Reasons for all of these phenomena can be found in the Niger-Congo languages. Also compared are the tense systems of Niger-Congo and black dialect speakers. (DO)

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ED028418

THE UNCLE REMUS DIALECT: A PRELIMINARY LINGUISTIC VIEW*

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The fact that the black population of the United States has had highly distinctive speech habits has been reflected variously by American writers since the eighteenth century. No consistency of purpose or practice can be discerned in early attempts to represent this speech. And since such attempts were usually for comic purposes it would be unusual if consistency were found. It is interesting to observe that the chief use of divergent speech or dialect in literature is comic. We may recall Chaucer's use of Northern dialect in the Reeves Tales and Shakespeare's use of Southern in Henry IV. Closer in time is Tennyson's use of dialect in his Northern Farmer poem where the use is not comic. The case of Robert Burns is not precisely applicable since he was actually writing a literary dialect which was "regional" only to his English readers.

Joel Chandler Harris, an extremely well-read man, was certainly well acquainted with the work of his predecessors in the writing of dialect, and his own work in this domain occurred in a period which knew both the Yankee dialect of Lowell, the Negro dialect of Thomas Nelson Page and countless others.

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AL 001 767

In the Uncle Remus cycle, Harris was interested primarily in the stories but he wrote, significantly: "The dialect is a part of the legends themselves, and to present them in any other way would be to rob them of everything that gives them vitality." (Introduction, Nights with Uncle Remus). The black dialect Harris presents is that he heard in his youth (and probably continued to hear during his adult life) in Middle Georgia. In some of the tales he does introduce a character, Daddy Jack, who comes from the Sea Islands and speaks Gullah. Of this Gullah speech Harris says: "It is the negro dialect in its most primitive state -- the 'Gullah' talk of some of the negroes on the Sea Islands being merely a confused and untranslatable mixture of English and African words" (Ibid.).

As inadequate as was Harris' judgement in this case it was better than that of Alphonso Gonzales, a collector of Gullah tales, who reported that there were at most a few African words in Gullah. Lorenzo Dow Turner, whose book Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect (Chicago, 1949) is basic, found thousands. This pivotal work has only recently began to be recognized for its fundamental importance.

It is to Turner and to the anthropologist Melville Herskovits and the section on language in his book The Myth of the Negro Past (New York, 1941) that we owe the first scientific orientation to the study of black speech in the United States. For the past few years we have had a rash of enthusiastic approaches to black speech arising out of the fashionable and profitable industry of ministering to the culturally deprived, the disadvantaged, and the underprivileged. If this school is waiting for a name, I hereby dub it "Instant Social Work Linguistics." These approaches with their

completely synchronic biases will lead inevitably, if not chastened, to as much distortion as the older paternalistic descriptions of black speech, now mercifully, and I might add, mercilessly, forgotton.

I will cite as a respectable example of the paternalistic tradition Cleanth Brooks' The Relation of the Alabama-Georgia Dialect to the Provincial Dialects of Great Britain (Baton Rouge, 1935), in which we read: "in almost every case the specifically negro forms turn out to be older English forms which the negro must have taken originally from the white man, and which he has retained after the white man has begun to lose them."

Professor Brooks, of course, has long since left the South for New England and philology for the now not so new New Criticism. I intend no disrespect in referring to his truly valuable work as paternalistic phonology. It has been suceeded to, but not superseded by, neo-paternalistic structuralism and crypto-paternalistic transformationalism.

The basic contribution of Herskovits was to establish the following main points:

(1) that black people in the New World, including the United States, came from regions of Africa where related languages were spoken;

(following the Greenberg classification these languages belong to the Niger-Congo family, specifically the Kwa branch which includes Akan, Yoruba, Ewe, Fon, Baule, Ibo, etc.)

(2) that inevitably upon initial contact with New World dialects of European languages, speakers of these African languages created pidgins, overwhelmingly Niger-Congo in structure and varyingly European in lexicon;

(3) that the pidgins were suceeded by creoles.

I will add that some of the creoles were in turn suceeded by creolized varieties of European languages.

Joel Chandler Harris, in perfect innocence, emerges as a skilled recorder of such a creolized variety of Southern speech-- the black Middle Georgia dialect. I am not further concerned in this paper with his reproduction of Gullah-- a true creole.

Every English-speaking writer who wishes to record dialect comes up against the iron wall of the twenty-six letter alphabet. That he must make do with as best he can. The graphic result is what we can only refer to as "funny spelling." The average reader need only see a line of "funny spelling" to expect that a good laugh will result from its decipherment.

"Funny spelling" does not differentiate between illiterate or reformed spelling (it's the same thing!) and dialect spelling. By reformed spelling I mean graphemic representations of standard speech items in a simplified manner. Such items are not distinguishing features of a given dialect but are common to it and other related dialects. Thus they have no significance for dialect study.

We may take it for granted that the dialect presented in the Uncle Remus cycle shares a host of features with the white dialect of Middle Georgia, without at the present time going into the question. Suffice to say we are not following Cleanth Brooks who said in 1935: "For the purpose of this study the speech of the Negro and of the white will be considered as one".

The most conspicuous feature of this dialect is the absence of the interdental consonant in any position:

dey, de, dere, needer, bofe.

This feature has been universally observed by recorders of the dialect. It is doubtless to be attributed to the lack of this phoneme in the Niger-Congo consonant system, and not as folk-linguists have done for centuries to lip-thickness, tongue-laziness, or simple incapacity.

Another conspicuous feature of this dialect is palatalization of the voiced and voiceless velar consonants:

gwine, k'yar

Here again the origin is to sought in the Niger-Congo phonemic system where such palatalization is a regular feature.

The suppression of all varieties of the phoneme "r" is consistently marked:

bodes, fus, natally, wu'd ku'us

The two alveolar phonemes "r" and "l" are highly unstable in the Niger-Congo family, and they are occasionally substituted for dental "t" and "d". The Uncle Remus dialect yields the form "marters" for "matters". The general conditioning of this phenomenon by the Niger-Congo languages was, we may well suspect, reinforced by the phonetic drift of the Southern dialect. Phonemic "l" is sometimes reinforced by a bilabial: "fambly."

Morphologically we may note the frequent deletion of prefixing elements:

'low, 'spects, 'kase, 'fo, 'bleedz.

Since the full semantic value of these words is not affected by the deletions, the morphological revisions are in the direction of the monosyllabic bases of Niger-Congo languages.

A complementary feature is contraction:

m'on, n'er, one er n'er

Similar contractions in various creoles suggest that these are phenomena of contact between Niger-Congo languages and European languages.

Grammatical elements include the uninflected verb and the uninflected genitive. Their currency in Middle English must not blind us to other sources in the affixing patterns of the Niger-Congo languages which prefix rather than suffix grammatical elements. Middle English hardly helps us in accounting for copula omission. The Niger-Congo family does.

The tense system of the Niger-Congo languages is much more complex than that of English which primitively had only two tenses. It is likely therefore that we will find here the greatest inconsistencies in the Uncle Remus dialect, for despite Harris' intuitive grasp of the dialect he recorded, its extreme subtlety in this respect would almost certainly have escaped him. At the moment we can only sketch in the problem.

The following grammatically distinct tenses are recorded for some members of the Niger-Congo family: Present, Near Past, Remote Past, Future, Aspect of Progress, Aspect of Completion, Past Aspect of Repetition. If we were called upon to reproduce this in English for the verb "go" we might arrive at the following paradigm:

Present	he go
Near Past	he gone
Remote Past	he been gone
Future	he going to go
Aspect of Progress	he going
Aspect of Completion	he done gone
Past Aspect of Repetition	he been going

I have heard all of these forms used by contemporary speakers of black dialect. I believe that in certain forms recorded by Harris such as "tuck 'n tuck" we have evidence for the existence of such verbal paradigms.

Further features of this dialect, particularly in the areas of syntax and lexicon await initial investigation against the background of the Niger-Congo family, as well as that of English dialectology. The careful use of the evidence provided by an intuitive dialectologist of the order of skill of Joel Chandler Harris can serve to give needed diachronic depth to studies of black speech now in progress.